

The struggle for power on doomed Bering Sea trawler

It's been 19 months since five men died in the sinking of the F/V Alaska Ranger on Easter morning. Exactly one year after the sinking, The Seattle Times published an article by longtime fisheries reporter Hal Bernton about the human drama leading up to the Ranger's last voyage. We're reprinting it with permission.



Survivors were brought to the Coast Guard's Munro.

By Hal Bernton

Japanese fish master Satoshi Konno was a tall man with ramrod posture and a volcanic temper. He erupted one summer day in 1994 aboard a Seattle-based trawler as a young American crewman accidentally slipped a bag of frozen fish into the wrong hold.

Konno walked up behind the crewman and, without warning, shoved him face-first onto the deck. When the crewman protested, Konno “went ballistic on me, and started screaming: ‘You are nothing. If I want you off the boat, you’re off the boat,’” Clayton Putnam recalled.

Putnam filed a complaint with the boat’s owner, The Fishing Company of Alaska. The incident 15 years ago foreshadowed a pattern of misconduct by Konno and other Japanese fish masters working aboard the six vessels owned by the Seattle-based seafood company.

The fish masters are hired by a Japanese seafood buyer as advisers to help Fishing Company of Alaska catch and process Alaska fish. Their role is not to make command decisions aboard the company’s ships.

But according to Putnam and a dozen other former crew members, some of the Japanese nationals appeared to flout U.S. maritime laws that require licensed American captains and mates to control the company’s fleet during the pressure-packed harvests that unfold in perilous conditions.

Over the years, some of the Japanese fish masters physically assaulted some of the company’s American crewmen, repeatedly violated policies that prohibit shipboard drinking, and helped oust two American skippers who defied their directives, the former crew members say.

Such conduct increased the risks facing the Fishing Company of Alaska crews, who toil in an industry with the highest death rate in the U.S.

Those dangers were starkly evident one year ago when the *Alaska Ranger*, a 189-foot vessel operated by Fishing Company of Alaska with 47 crew, sank March 23 in the Bering Sea, claiming the lives of five crew members, including Konno. It took a dramatic rescue by the Coast Guard and a sister ship to avert a worse disaster.

In the weeks before the *Ranger* sank, Konno helped run off its U.S. captain. The Coast Guard is examining Konno’s conduct before the sinking, and has launched a separate investigation of the conduct of



The trawl deck of the Ranger.

other Japanese fish masters who work on Fishing Company of Alaska's boats. The company, which operated seven ships when the *Alaska Ranger* was still afloat, is one of the few in the North Pacific waters off Alaska that still relies heavily on foreign fish masters.

"I have grave concerns that the continued practice of having [Japanese] fish masters control the operation of these vessels could lead to another casualty," said Capt. Mark Hamilton, captain of the port for western Alaska. "I find that practice unacceptable."

Fishing Company of Alaska officials say their licensed American crews always retain command of the company's boats as they head, gut, and freeze the Bering Sea catch.

But in interviews, former crew said that power is usurped by some Japanese fish masters.

"They run the boats," said Eric Haynes, a cook who worked for the company beginning in 1994 and survived the 2008 sinking of the *Ranger*. "They run the wheelhouse. They run the deck. They run the [fish] factories. The Americans all have titles, but they answer to the Japanese."

"Fish or die" approach

For years, the government has been warned about the conduct of Fishing Company of Alaska's Japanese fish masters. In 1998, a federal fisheries observer aboard one of the company's factory ships reported that "the Japanese have little concern for safety, but their power in the company enabled them to override concerns of the American officers."

"The Japanese had a 'fish or die' ... approach to safety concerns. I believe this will lead to the demise of the vessel at some point," the observer wrote in comments obtained by The Seattle Times under the federal Freedom of Information Act.



Exhaustion aboard one of the ships searching for survivors.

In 2005, the Coast Guard received reports of three physical assaults by a Japanese fish master against a licensed U.S. mate aboard the company ship *Alaska Warrior*.

Yet only this year — in the aftermath of the sinking of the *Ranger* — has the Coast Guard turned its investigative spotlight on the company's Japanese fish masters.

Part of that focus is on Konno and whether he wielded improper influence aboard the *Ranger*.

“The key is not who was at the helm but who was making decisions,” said Capt. Mike Rand, chairman of a Marine Board of Investigation that is expected to release a report later this year about the loss of the ship.

A second Coast Guard investigation was triggered seven months after the *Ranger* went down. In October 2008, a first mate aboard the company's *Alaska Juris* radioed the Coast Guard to report that he had been assaulted by an intoxicated Japanese fish master, Eiju Okuda. The fish master allegedly punched him in the head and grabbed the helm of the trawler.

This second Coast Guard investigation could result in civil fines against Fishing Company of Alaska, or possible referral for prosecution, according to Hamilton, the captain of the port in Anchorage.

Fishing Company of Alaska — in a prepared statement — said it would not comment on incidents that may be under investigation by a government agency or subject to litigation.

“FCA also declines to respond to accusations and innuendoes from sources of questionable trustworthiness and motives,” the statement said.

Simmering tensions

The Fishing Company of Alaska is based in an office on Seattle's Lower Queen Anne Hill. The business, which this year employs more than 200 crew members on six ships, is owned by Karena Adler, a reclusive 55-year-old who lives on Mercer Island.

Adler founded the company in the mid-1980s, less than a decade after the 1976 passage of a landmark American fishery law that gave U.S. vessels first claim to all seafood harvests within 200 miles of the nation's coasts.

Many of the U.S. fishing companies initially used foreign-born fish masters, but most no longer used them as the Americans gained expertise in Alaskan waters. Adler bucked that trend, keeping the Japanese fish masters and several other Japanese employees aboard each vessel.

This reliance on the fish master reflects her partnership with a Japanese seafood buyer, Anyo Fisheries, which buys most of the company's catch of mackerel, rock fish, and other species favored in Asian markets.

Sales to Anyo generate millions of dollars a year needed to help bankroll Adler's company.

There is also a personal tie between Adler and Anyo.

As a young woman, she lived in Japan, where she met Masashi Yamada, a wealthy Japanese

businessman whom she married. They divorced in 1984. Yamada's family holding company, Yamada Group, controls Anyo, according to testimony last year before the Japanese legislature by a former Yamada executive. Adler did not respond to requests for an interview, and Yamada could not be reached for comment.



The Coast Guard gathered all Ranger survival suits during the investigation.

Anyo President Shigeru Nagano in a

telephone interview said the Japanese fish masters and other Anyo employees are on board at the request of Fishing Company of Alaska, and are aboard only to advise and educate American fishermen. He said he was unaware of any allegations of misconduct. "We don't involve them in the operation of any U.S. vessel," he said.

The Japanese fish masters have brought a fierce work ethic and devotion to fishing that few Americans can match, according to a former Fishing Company of Alaska employee.

"You had to pay them homage because they were the ones that were always going to be there," said Rosie Szymanski, who spent six years working for Adler. "And if they were given that respect, it was not a problem."

But there were some American skippers who couldn't get along with some of their Japanese colleagues, said George Anderson, who served as Adler's port captain from 1985-95.

"Among Americans, you had problems of prejudice and things like that. Some of them just weren't able to bridge the gap."

Anderson said that during the decade he worked for Adler, he would not tolerate a fish master's assaulting an American skipper, and neither would Adler.

Others described tension aboard the company's vessels as licensed American skippers sought to assert control over the Japanese crew.

"There were a number of different power struggles involving Japanese fish masters," said Bill Chace, who served as a Fishing Company of Alaska skipper from 1996-98. "I am a third-generation New England fisherman and could not agree with how things were run. The captain has to be No. 1."

Richard Canty, a former Fishing Company of Alaska captain, said he needed the job and did what was necessary to get along with the Japanese when he first went to work for the company in 1989. But over time, he rebelled.

Once, a Japanese fish master on a company factory ship wanted to take the shortest route back to port, despite heavy seas. Canty wanted a slower, safer course. "We got into a shoving match, and I said to [him],

‘Keep off my wheel,’” Canty said.

Twice, he said, he was transferred to different boats after quarreling with the fish masters. In 2004, he balked at a fish master’s request to throw low-value pollock overboard, which federal rules required to be kept. The fish master called Adler from the ship and asked that Canty be removed.

Canty said he tried to fight back, telling Adler about the dispute and submitting photographs of liquor bottles in the fish master’s cabin, a violation of company policy. In the end, Canty lost his job. “She said I was trying to destroy her company.”

Fishing Company of Alaska’s conservation violations have not escaped scrutiny from federal investigators. Last year, it was fined almost \$450,000 to settle charges of fishing in closed areas and other illegal activity by several of its factory ships. It was one of the largest such fines ever paid for fishery-conservation violations in the North Pacific, according to federal officials.

Two captains leave *Ranger*



A memorial service at Seattle's Fishermen's Terminal.

It was 1993 when Clayton Putnam went to sea, landing a job on Adler’s *Alaska Juris*. The 20-year-old greenhorn quickly learned that the Japanese — who ate separately from the Americans — were at the top of the pecking order.

Konno, who would later become fish master of the *Alaska Ranger*, was then an assistant fish master and a taskmaster who once scoffed at complaints about an electrical short in the fish factory, joking it helped keep workers alert, Putnam said. Then in 1994, a worker was shocked so badly he was rendered unconscious and had to be evacuated from the boat, said Putnam, who left the company that year.

Konno was later promoted to fish master. Aboard the *Alaska Ranger*, he continued to clash with the American crew. In 2006, he insisted on keeping fish slimed by hydraulic oil, and almost came to blows over it with the captain, Jeff

Parker, according to Haynes, the cook.

When the season ended, Parker was replaced by Steve Slotvig, who also had a rocky relationship with Konno.

Konno so despised Slotvig that by late 2007 the Japanese fish master would leave the dining area whenever Slotvig came in, according to Haynes.

A big blowup came in early 2008, weeks before the boat sank, as Konno — who was at the helm — pushed the vessel through unusually thick ice. There was some violent scraping and vibration of the hull, several crew members said, and Slotvig wanted to slow down.

Several crew members witnessed the incident.

“Captain Steve told him that ‘It’s my f’ing boat,’ and that he should be driving it,” Kenny Smith, a surviving crew member testified at a Coast Guard hearing in Seattle.

Konno started yelling at him in Japanese and then spit in Slotvig’s face, Smith said.

After that, Konno boasted that he had called Adler, the company owner, and predicted that Slotvig would be booted off the boat when it reached port in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, according to Haynes.

During a Coast Guard hearing last year, Slotvig said he couldn’t remember the argument over the ice but did recall other disputes with Konno. He said it was his decision to leave the *Ranger* in early March just weeks before it sank: “I had been up there a long time, and when he [Konno] got angry with me, I asked to be put on another vessel.”

Ship thrust into reverse

Survivors of the *Ranger* say that Slotvig was far from a perfect skipper, but he was big on safety.

He knew about the *Ranger*'s controllable-pitch propeller — key information that might have helped save lives just weeks later when the *Ranger* began leaking in the stern and then sank. When the ship's electrical power was lost, and the engines continued to operate, the propeller could put the vessel into reverse. That would make it very difficult for the crew to scramble safely into life rafts.

Slotvig, testifying before a Coast Guard panel, said that he was aware that the propeller could send the boat backward. While at port in January 2008, he tested shutting down the engines using an emergency cutoff in the wheelhouse.

After Slotvig left the boat, he was replaced by captain Eric “Pete” Jacobsen, of Lynnwood. It's unclear if Jacobsen fully understood the risk posed by the controllable-pitch propeller. During the last tense hour before the *Ranger* sank, survivors recall Jacobsen talking with other crew about whether to leave the engines running. They said Jacobsen never mentioned that a loss of electrical power could send the vessel on a treacherous reverse course.

The electrical power did cut out, and the propeller drove the *Ranger* into reverse, plunging its stern into the sea. The trawler listed sharply and the crew struggled to abandon ship. Because it was moving backward, the ship's life rafts shot forward and out of reach of some of the crew, according to Coast Guard investigators.

In the chaotic final minutes aboard the vessel, Jacobsen emerged on deck, asking “why the hell are we going in reverse?” recalled Paul Munoz, a crewman who survived.

Konno stayed quiet in the wheelhouse. Witnesses said his survival suit was rolled down to his waist, and he was puffing slowly on a cigarette as if resigned to his fate.

More than half of the 47 crew never reached the life rafts. The sinking threatened to be one of the worst U.S. fishing disasters, but Coast Guard helicopters and a sister ship managed to rescue most of the crew from the sea. Among the five who perished on March 23 were Jacobsen and Konno, whose body was never recovered.

Former crew member Putnam, now 36 and working a desk job, was stunned to learn of the *Ranger*'s fate.

“The Bering Sea is an unforgiving place,” Putnam said. “Yet I do feel if the management had not been kowtowing to the Japanese on important safety and operational issues, those men, including Konno, would likely still be alive. I feel like someone needs to speak up about a culture of silence that led to tragedy.”

The mysterious Karena Adler

On Nov. 14, 1980, Karena Adler, a young woman from New Jersey, married Masashi Yamada, a middle-aged Japanese businessman.

Their union in Honolulu ended in divorce, which was finalized in 1984. Their business ties, however, have endured, and both have profited from a fortune in seafood pulled from Alaskan waters.

Adler, now 55, is the owner of The Fishing Company of Alaska, the Seattle company that operated the *Alaska Ranger*, which sank a year ago in a tragedy that has sparked a Coast Guard investigation. The company still operates six other factory ships that fish for mackerel, rock fish, and other species in the Bering Sea.



Survivors finally warm after ordeal.



Ice as seen from the Ranger's deck.

Adler's former husband, Yamada, controls Anyo Fisheries, the company that buys millions of dollars worth of the seafood caught each year by her company.

Anyo Fisheries, based in Japan, also operates its own fleet of fishing vessels outside U.S. waters. The company lost one of its ships — the *Anyo Maru No. 1* — when it capsized off the coast of Russia in 1999. Twelve of the 36 crew died, and the Japanese Coast Guard accused Anyo of inadequate safety measures, according to the Japan Economic News Wire.

The U.S. Coast Guard is also investigating the conduct of several Anyo employees who work as advisers known as fish masters aboard Adler's factory ships.

Adler and Yamada, 85, both guard their privacy, and there has been little published over the years about their business relationship.

Anyo is only a small piece of a much larger business empire controlled by Yamada. The Yamada Group includes some 40 companies in real estate, manufacturing, fisheries, and other sectors, according to a brief — and rare — biography published by Vanderbilt University of Tennessee, which honored him in 1998 with an award for supporting the U.S.-Japan Center on campus.

Yamada also is a founder of Yamada Corp., a trading company involved in defense contracting in Japan. Its corporate office was raided in 2007 amid charges of fraud, bribery, and other wrongdoing, according to accounts in *Japan Today* and other Japanese newspapers.

Yamada's tie to Anyo was disclosed last May as a footnote in a public hearing involving the defense contracting and other business dealings. A former Yamada Corp. executive said the fishing company was controlled by the Yamada Group.

In addition to his vast business holdings, Yamada is known for his passion for golf. In 1995, he and a professional partner took first place in the celebrated AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am tournament.

But a sharp-eyed U.S. golf official concluded that Yamada had submitted a greatly inflated handicap that had given him an unfair advantage. Further investigation found that the handicap had been submitted by a pro who worked at a golf club that Yamada owned.

Yamada was stripped of his amateur title.

"It's a violation of the spirit and the intent of the game. He was asked for an explanation, but there was no reply," said Dean Knuth, the former U.S. Golf Association official who investigated Yamada.